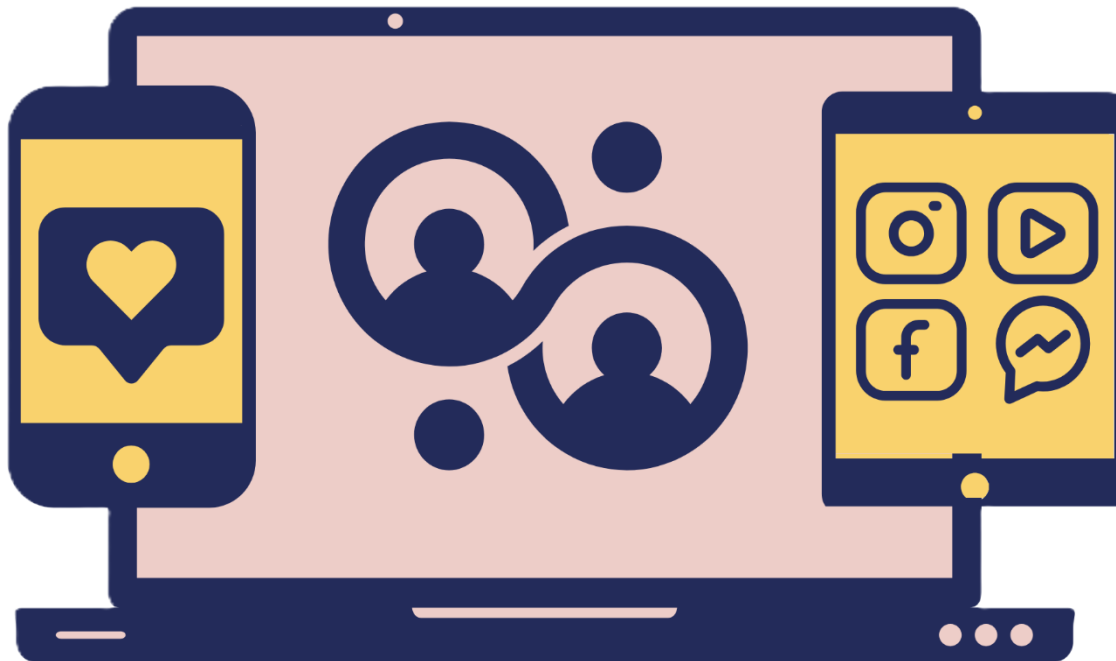# Conversation Guide: Harassing and Threatening Messages on Social Media

## What are harassing and threatening messages on social media?

Harassing messages on social media are when someone repeatedly makes harmful comments on a survivor's posts, shares damaging information about them, or sends private messages intended to bother, threaten, or intimidate them—especially after being told to stop. This type of behaviour can make a person feel unsafe or afraid. This can happen on any social media platform, including Facebook, WhatsApp, Snapchat, Instagram, gaming platforms, and many others.

*This could look like someone:*

- Sending abusive, mean, scary, or pushy messages through private messaging options or DMs.
- Sending nonstop messages.
- Tagging someone repeatedly or posting rude, hurtful, or endless comments on a survivor's social media posts.

## Conversation Starters with Survivors:

Before getting started, remind yourself of the foundational principles of survivor centered tech safety support, see The 4 Core Principles of Tech Safety Planning

**1** **Step 1: Understand what is happening**

Start by asking questions that will help you learn how the abuser is using social media to send harassing and threatening messages. This helps assess the level of risk and harm and determine which specific strategies and platforms you need to focus on. Some example questions to ask:

- Does someone make fun of you, embarrass you, or threaten you through social media?
    - Which platforms is this happening on?
    - What does this look like? Is it DMs, comments on your posts, are they making their own posts about you, etc.
- Do their messages make you feel scared or unsafe?
- How often do you get mean or scary messages on social media?
- Does your current or former partner force you to reply to their messages by threatening you or getting angry if you don't answer?
- Are you being tagged over and over?

**2**  **Step 2: Understand what the survivor wants to do**

*Each survivor's needs and goals will be different. Instead of assuming what should happen next, ask:*

- What would you like to see happen? What do you want?
- Do you have an order or peace bond that the abusive messages are breaching?
- Do you want the messages to stop?
- Do you want law enforcement involved?
- Do you want to keep a record of what has happened?
- Do you want to prevent your current or former partner from accessing your social media?

**3**  **Step 3: Identify strategies that will match the survivor's goals**

Once the survivor's goals are clear, help them develop a plan to use social media safely and reduce further harm. the focus here should be on technological strategies and responses. You should also take whatever other steps you would normally recommend if, for example, an abuser is breaching a peace bond or court order or if you have immediate or urgent concerns about the survivor's safety. Below are some suggested strategies:

*If the survivor wants the harassment to stop, safety strategies may include:*

- Unfollowing or unfriending the abusive person. This can prevent their posts from appearing in the survivor's feed. However, the abuser can continue to follow the survivor and may still see the survivor's posts. They can also send direct messages, though these will typically appear as "message requests" until accepted.
    - o To unfollow someone on social media, a survivor can usually go to the abusive person's profile and click "Following" or "Liked, and then select "Unfollow."

- Blocking the abusive person. This can prevent them from contacting the survivor or viewing their social media.
  - This should only be done if it is safe (it will not escalate their risk of harm) and if the survivor is comfortable losing access to the abuser's social media. For example, if a current or former partner is posting harmful content about the survivor, they may want to monitor it or document it before blocking them.
  - To block someone on social media, go to your account settings and follow the search  instructions or learn more through the "Secure Your Tech" menu at [www.techsafety.ca](www.techsafety.ca)

*If the survivor must remain in contact with their abuser but wants to reduce exposure to harassment and threats, they can consider the following strategies:*

- Adjust privacy settings to control how their profile appears to the abuser, including making it private. This allows a survivor to decide who can view your posts and account information.
- Use the "mute" feature (if available) to hide the abuser's posts and stories so the survivor doesn't have to see what they post. The abuser will be able to view the survivor's updates, and they can be in contact if needed.
- Disable read receipts within DM's by going to the privacy settings within the account.
- Avoid responding to the abuser's messages and instead save them as evidence.
- Create a separate account for safe communication while keeping the main account for documentation purposes and being in contact with the abuser if necessary.

*If the survivor wants the messages removed or taken down:*

- Report abuse to platforms like Facebook, Snapchat, or other apps. Most companies don't allow harassment and can take action.

*If the survivor is concerned that their abuser can access their account:*

- Safeguard passwords to prevent the abuser from accessing their account and posting humiliating or hateful content.

*If the survivor is considering legal action or reporting:*

Survivors might not be sure if they want to go to the police or they may know they don't want to involve law enforcement right now. However, harassing or threatening messages through social media can disappear; if the evidence isn't preserved when the abuse happens, they may not be able to access it later if they change their mind about involving law enforcement. Encourage them to preserve evidence of abusive messages so they have proof if they ever need it later.  Here are some suggestions:

- Consider reporting the abuse to social media companies.  The abuser's actions may violate the platform's terms and services and they may be able to remove them or take other action. Ensure threats and harassment are documented before reporting, as they may not be accessible anymore once a company acts.
- Let the survivor know that reporting to the police could lead to an investigation to see if the abuser broke any laws.
- Keep a record of the harassing and threatening messages. Write down the time, date, who did it, and any other important details. See WSC's Sample Technology-Facilitated Violence Log here
- Take screenshots or video screen record the abusive messages when it happens.
- Check if the app tells the other person when they take a screenshot (like Snapchat). If it does, it might be safer to use another device to take a photo or video instead.
- Include the person's profile and any details that show who they are in evidence.
- Make sure the date of the abusive message is visible in the evidence.
- Store the evidence in a safe place. Back it up somewhere else, too, just in case.

Harassment and threats on social media can be distressing and harmful, but survivors have options to protect themselves and take action. By exploring their goals, adjusting privacy

settings, documenting abuse, and considering reporting options, anti-violence workers can help survivors navigate technology-facilitated abuse in ways that prioritize their safety and autonomy. Providing clear, survivor-centered support empowers individuals to make informed decisions and take steps that best support their well-being and security.

## Suggested Resources

- [What is Tech-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence?](What is Tech-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence?)
- [Is Tech Abuse Hapening to You (Poster)](Is Tech Abuse Hapening to You (Poster))
- [Tech Safety Planning Conversation Starters](Tech Safety Planning Conversation Starters)
- [Tech Safety Planning Conversation Starters for Anti-Violence Workers Supporting Indigenous Survivors](Tech Safety Planning Conversation Starters for Anti-Violence Workers Supporting Indigenous Survivors)
- [Your Safety, Your Voice: Dealing with Harassing and Threatening Messages](Your Safety, Your Voice: Dealing with Harassing and Threatening Messages) – Video for Survivors
- [Specific App Guides](Specific App Guides) is a helpful section found within the Tech Safety and Privacy Toolkit.
- [Dealing with Harassing Calls, Texts and Messages](Dealing with Harassing Calls, Texts and Messages)
- [Safety Planning Check List](Safety Planning Check List)
- [Preserving Digital Evidence Toolkit](Preserving Digital Evidence Toolkit)

*Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence (TFGBV) is part of a larger pattern of violence that can happen both online and in person. As a support worker, it's important to let survivors know they are not alone.  For guidance on addressing TFGBV, you can refer to our comprehensive [techsafety.ca](techsafety.ca) website.*

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